

# INSPIRE

## THE WIM REVIEW

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### Prof. Tan Sri Annuwar Ali

President and Vice-Chancellor, Open University Malaysia

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# NEVER TOO LATE TO LEARN

**There are myriad of reasons why many people don't have tertiary education.**

For some, family finances may not have permitted them the luxury of university straight out of school. For others, the disinclination to study may have steered them away from more chalk and talk after 12 years of classes. But there does come a time when the "I Coodabeen" thought crosses everybody's mind, and inevitably, that thought involves higher education.

Majella Gomes

**C**all it intellectual snobbery, but there is a definite tendency for qualifications from traditional university systems to be viewed as somehow superior to those offered by an open university. However, Open University Malaysia (OUM) is well on its way to debunking this myth, firmly believing that open entry does not connote lower standards.

The University assesses its applicants' relevant working experience when considering placement. Under the open entry system, candidates for the undergraduate programme must be at least 21 years old with a minimum PMR certificate or its equivalent. For OUM's Masters programme, candidates must be at least 35 years old, with STPM or equivalent qualifications.

This system has received enthusiastic response from the public, if its rolls are anything to go by. Starting with just 273 students in August 2001, the institution now boasts close to 50,000 students enrolled in more than 40 courses offered by its five faculties. In February last year, OUM received approval from the Ministry of Higher Education to implement the open entry system.

The University's President and Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Tan Sri Anuwar Ali, suppresses a chuckle at the mention of the "traditional vs open entry" debate. "Perhaps it's just the other universities that say it," he responds, "or it may be the general public perception of what an open university offers. But our priority is our



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President and Vice-Chancellor,  
Open University Malaysia**

students, and I should point out that a very high percentage of our enrolment comprise working adults who are very focused about what they want."

OUM uses the Recognition by Prior Learning (RPL) assessment system that matches an applicant's educational, work

and life experiences to the requirements of a recognised study programme. This system helps to identify learning abilities that the applicant has acquired formally and informally, that contribute towards his/her capabilities.

At OUM, quality is paramount, which is why efforts are made to formulate learning modules of the highest quality, incorporating input from subject matter experts from other universities. "We constantly assess the quality of our learning materials, and of our teaching staff," Prof. Tan Sri Anuwar says. "Currently, we have more than 2000 part-time tutors with impeccable credentials. Many of them have both academic and industry experience, so students receive tutoring based on both these spheres."

Even so, the University also makes sure its approach of assessing its applicants' prior learning experiences is supported by external resources. It consults the National Accreditation Board, and has sought input from other similar but more established open-entry organisations in New Zealand, the UK and South Africa.

Prof. Tan Sri Anuwar adds that because the majority of OUM's students are working adults, their expectations of the University are very high. "Definitely, they know what they are getting when they sign up for a course, and they expect value for money. They have a very different take on education, compared to students who enter university straight after school. OUM may offer study flex-



ibility and more options, but many of our students have already mapped out their career paths based on their work experience up to that point."

The common denominator for many of OUM's students and their younger, non-working counterparts in more established universities, is that tertiary education at this stage of their lives represents a brighter future. The difference is that most of OUM's students already know which professional direction they will be taking, and angle their course selections accordingly. They don't dither or change their minds.

A case in point is the course OUM started for primary school teachers that allows them to study for a Bachelor's degree in Education which upgrades teachers from diploma to degree level, and its first batch of students who have undergone this

course graduated in December 2006. With a tertiary qualification under their belt, they will be better able to advance professionally, especially in teaching specialist courses such as engineering-based subjects in technical or vocational schools.

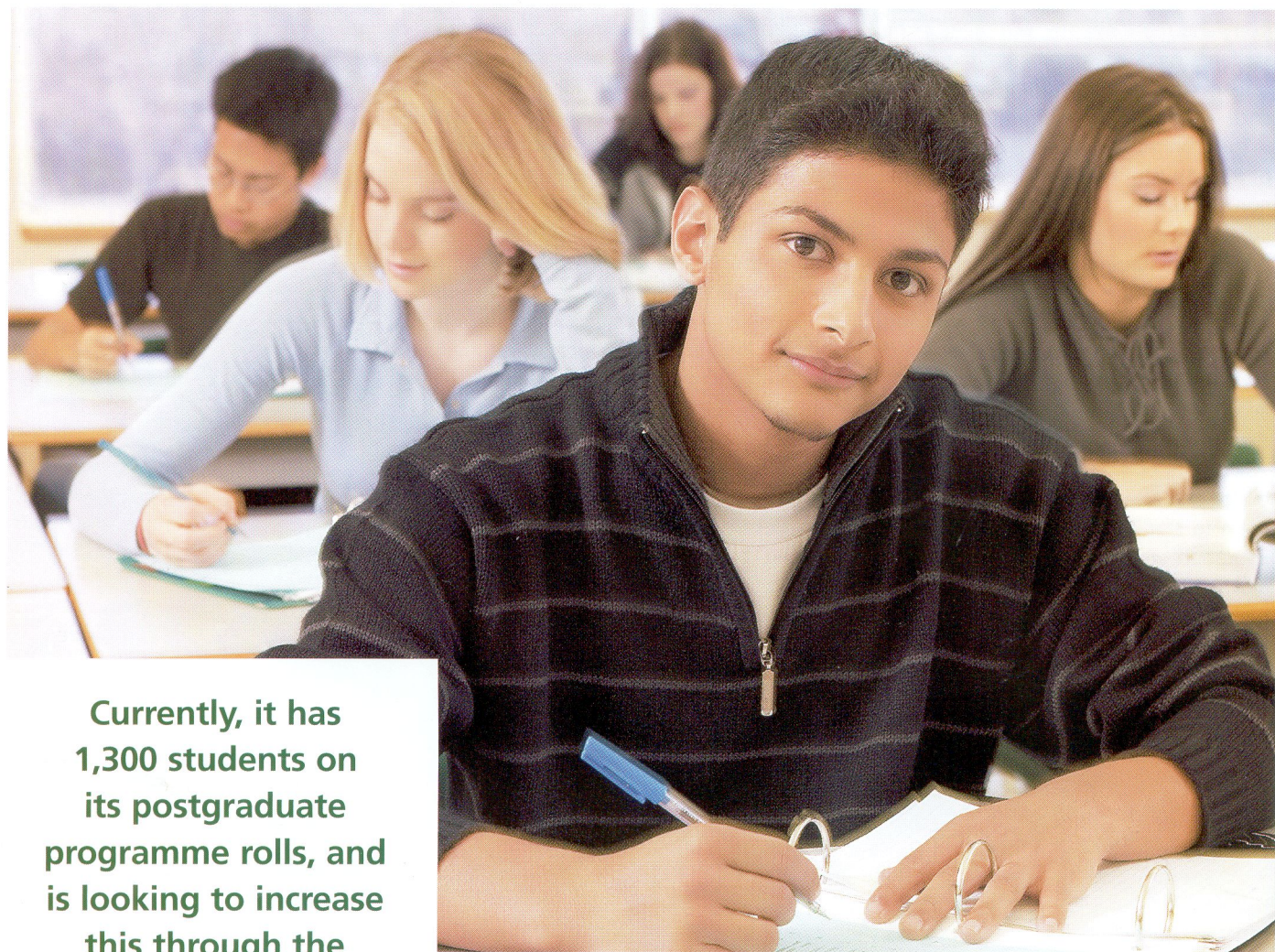
But this does not apply solely to teachers. Everyone benefits from further education, personally and professionally. Says Prof. Tan Sri Anuwar, "We really do want to do what's best for our working adults because it ultimately enhances the human capital of the nation."

On its future plans, Prof. Tan Sri Anuwar divulges the University is concentrating on improving its international links, having started three centres in Yemen, Bahrain and Pekan Besar, Sumatra respectively, offering postgraduate programmes in IT

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quintessential pragmatism that underpins an establishment like OUM: the training, utilisation and appropriate deployment of the country's human capital. Many of OUM's students have similar life stories: family circumstances that did not permit further studies; followed by work or family commitments that continued to hobble them well into their adult years.

The lack of education kept them in low-paid jobs with no prospects for promotion or career advancement. They have potential; they just needed the opportunity – and OUM has been able to provide just that. While it is a beacon of hope, it is also helping to develop unrealised talent that somehow slipped through the cracks of the conventional education system.

As an educator himself, Prof. Tan Sri Anuwar expresses concern about the need for the local education system to keep abreast with market demand. "There are a number of factors that must be considered when we speak of improving our current education system," he says. "While there is

a definite need to reform the system, there will be numerous hurdles to implementation. We need to look at the improvement of school environments in general, upgrading of educational infrastructure and lowering the student-teacher ratio."

He acknowledges that teachers nowadays do not enjoy the status their predecessors did half a century ago, and that constitutes a major part of the problem especially where attracting and retaining teaching talent is concerned. Teaching today is a low-paid, largely unsung job – despite the lip service paid to it as the pillar on which future generations will be built – so it is really no wonder that graduates prefer the vagaries of the business world to the stability of a career in education.

It is difficult enough for those with tertiary education to find a niche in their environments of choice; the bar is even higher for those without. But what the graduates lack, the experienced have in abundance – and OUM is about making it work for them. ■

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In the course of its relatively short existence, the University has already picked up some impressive awards and mentions in prestigious circles. One magazine has commended its extensive use of IT in its distance-learning programmes, indicating that the University's efforts have not gone unnoticed. Indeed, the use of IT, the Internet, Web-based learning modules and an impressive digital library have been major contributing factors to OUM's success.

However, beyond all these enablers is the